DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 167 785 CE 020 219

AUTHOR Niemi, John A.
TITLE Pioneers in Alaskan Adult Education.
PUB DATE 27 Sep 78
NOTE 17p.; Keynote address presented at the Annual Conference of the Alaska Adult Education Association (4th, Anchorage, Alaska, September 27, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Basic Education; *Adult Education Programs; Adult Literacy; Continuous Learning; Educationally Disadvantaged; Educational Needs; Educational Opportunities; *High School Equivalency Programs; Military Training; *Program Descriptions; School Role; Training
IDENTIFIERS *Alaska; Army

ABSTRACT

Serious problems were posed by North American pioneer efforts to force their traditions on Eskimos, Indians, and Aleuts. Fortunately, other pioneers, such as home economists and district agents with the University of Alaska Cooperative Extension Service, responded to villagers' home and community needs. The University of Alaska also pioneered in offering mining/prospecting non-credit courses. Other higher education institutions initiated programs; for example, Kuskokwin Community College (1974) offered one of the first adult education degree programs. The U.S. Army at Fort Richardson introduced in the 1950s adult basic education (ABE), which by 1957 included eighth grade and high school equivalency (GED) certificate programs. Finally, a GED program for non-commissioned native officers was begun. Two other basic education pioneering efforts included training of native Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) teachers of ABE and the Anchorage Community College Adult Literacy Laboratory's development of culturally relevant educational materials. In determining the University of Alaska's adult education/training role, a study committee developed a continuing education plan. This was implemented in 1972. All provisions were realized, including continuing teacher education and satellite transmissions of GED tapes to many villages. In summary, there is a need to help adults obtain skills required by their vastly changed society; those finding new ways of helping adults learn will be called pioneers. (CSS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED167785

PIONEERS IN ALASKAN ADULT EDUCATION

BY

Dr. John A. Niemi
Professor of Adult Education
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, Illinois

Keynote Address
Fourth Annual Conference of the Alaska Adult Education Association
Anchorage, Alaska

September 27, 1978

CE 020 319

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

John A. Niemi

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

As I started to prepare this talk to you today, I suddenly realized that twenty-four years have passed since I first came to Anchorage as a young teacher hired to teach in the post schools at Fort Richardson. Then I arrived not by plane, but by road in a pickup truck to Fairbanks, and later by rail to Anchorage--experiences that gave me a sense of the vastness and variety of the Territory of Alaska. So, you see, I am no stranger to Alaska. During my ten-year stay here, I met many bright, dedicated people working in both rural and urban areas--but we never thought of ourselves as pioneers. We were, for the most part, young people thrilled to be living and working on one of the last frontiers, because there is a sense of freedom in such an environment. That freedom is possible because one encounters few of the constraints, or limits, found in older societies. There was an accompanying exhilaration that caused us to look at problems not as problems, but as challenges to our ingenuity and resourcefulness.

In thinking about these aspects of a pioneer society, I was inspired to look up the meaning of "pioneer" in the dictionary. It contained the usual references to the pioneer as innovator, explorer, one who blazes a trail for others. But I was interested to find that the word comes from Old French pionier, originally a foot soldier sent out to clear the way, and that this French term derives from the Latin word pedo, meaning "one with large feet." This term is not to be taken literally, of course, but as a metaphor referring to people whose sense of adventure drives them to explore new territories, as did the men who climbed the Chilkoot Pass in search of Klondike gold; to invent a better way to harvest salmon; or to devise a new approach to helping people learn. I suspect that "large feet" refers also to the idea that pioneers leave conspicuous footprints for us to follow.

In Alaska, in the early days, pioneering meant homesteading in places like the Matanuska Valley and a sense of community that grew out of the rigors of coping with a harsh new environment. An example I particularly like from the Alaska scene relates to the village of Beaver, which is one of the communities I studied when writing a Master's thesis for the University of Alaska:

> Beaver was founded in 1910 by a Japanese trader named Frank Yazudo. Yazudo led a group of Barrow Eskimos to this location, where they all settled to start a trading post and village. Beaver became the supply center for the gold-mining camps which were located 135 miles northeast of the village. Indians, gold prospectors, and fur-traders also migrated into the community.[1]

The important thing about the pioneering feat of Yazudo and his companions was that they pushed their way through the Brooks Range approximately 800 miles to settle in unfamiliar territory that was primarily the hunting area of the Athabascan Indian.

I realize that so far I have been talking about pioneering in Alaska in glowing, even romantic terms. I have not mentioned the serious problems posed by the invasion of North American society and its effects upon the lives of the Eskimos, the Indians, and the Aleuts. The threat to the environment has been heightened by the recent discovery of oil. There is an accompanying threat to the cultures of Native Alaskans, cultures that were early undermined by the efforts of some well-meaning government agencies and missions. The policies and practices of those agencies and missions closely resembled the colonial policies and practices instituted elsewhere by other Western cultures. In general, the aim was to acculturate the natives to the traditions and mores of the newcomers. Consequently, many of the problems under attack in rural Alaska today are similar to those facing countries in the Third World. Attempts to acculturate Native Alaskans were based on

the goals of the dominant American society, which failed to appreciate the uniqueness of the environment and the strengths of the native cultures. A graphic account of this attitude and of the way in which some missionaries regarded the Native Alaskans in this early period emerges in this report by Chance:

> Uncivilized, dirty, and uninhibited, these people were frequently considered inferior creatures of Divine Creation. Efforts to civilize the Native included attempts at destroying the Native language, culture, and religion, instilling guilt over barbarous customs, and promoting new forms of behavior and thought acceptable to western custom. Government policies of the period stress education for rapid economic and cultural assimilation.[2]

Fortunately, there were other pioneers from North American society who felt differently. Here is an enlightened comment by Jean Burand who, with her husband Bill, traveled during many years to countless Alaskan villages as a home economist with the Cooperative Extension Service of the University of Alaska:

> Living, like learning, is a two-way street, and it is important for instructors to listen. Teaching is more satisfying if teachers are learning, too. To teach those of a different culture, one must be willing to accept their values and standards as suitable for them, without passing judgment, and to sincerely want to share learning experiences.[3]

As an adult educator, I cannot resist the comment that Ms. Burand was following an important principle of adult education--the teacher's respect for the value systems of learners and the teacher's willingness to learn from them in an atmosphere of trust and sharing.

On a larger scale, the Cooperative Extension Service has been a pioneer in adulteducation in the United States through its success in relating research to practice, based on the needs of rural people; for example, developing new kinds of seeds and new techniques for cultivation. The Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines, which was

founded as a land grant institution in 1917 and later became the University of Alaska, had, among its founding goals, the application of the extension model to this vast territory comprising 586,400 square miles. Of all the pioneers in Cooperative Extension, I will have time to discuss the contributions of only two, who bore responsibility for the huge land mass from Fairbanks west to Nome and north to Barrow. I have already mentioned Jean Burand, who was instrumental in bringing homemaking skills to numerous small villages. Her personal credo as a teacher showed great concern for the needs of the individual learner, a quality which is always the hallmark of the good adult educator. Here is a delightful account which she wrote:

> "Elsie can't hear or talk, but she wants to come anyway. Is it okay?" When I heard this query, I knew, first, that the answer had to be "Yes" and, second, that I had to do some special planning for her to be able to derive needed satisfaction from the clothing construction class. All worked out very well. Elsie sat up front, I tried to face her when speaking and, by observing her reactions, improved my demonstrations and learned to form my words more exactly and more slowly, so that she could lip-read. She never had to wait for help or for a sewing machine. All of us exulted in her achievement. The other class members said they liked my teaching better when Elsie was there because "you use hands more and that way is easier to learn."[4]

Jean's counterpart, the district extension agent, Virgil Severns, who hailed from Kansas, is still working here. I remember him as a true adult educator who never imposed his ideas on people, but listened to their problems, made suggestions, and assisted them in carrying out their plans. I witnessed the fruits of his efforts when I conducted research for my Master's thesis. One of the villages I studied was Chalkyitsik. At that time, the villagers were in process of completing a new community hall. Pointing with pride to their neat, clean village, they told me that, for the past two years, they had won the Fairbanks Garden Club Cooperative Extension Service Home Yard

Improvement Trophy. In other words, the villagers demonstrated their interest and satisfaction in improving their conditions. In addition, the village council had purchased a field cultivator, to enable the adults and children to plant large home gardens. What was Severns' role in these developments? A very important one. He supported the people in their decisions, facilitated the carrying out of those decisions, and nurtured their progress.

A parallel extension activity emanating from the University of Alaska was the teaching of prospecting and mining courses for adults in urban and rural Alaska. It is interesting to note that when the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines (which, as I mentioned earlier, later became the University of Alaska) was established, this venture was seen by President Bunnell and the Legislature as an important outreach activity. As a result, the University pioneered the offering of non-credit courses on the subjects of mineral identification, mining law, and mining and prospecting. Two active people in this area were Bill Burand and Leo Mark Anthony. Many times I have glimpsed Leo at Fort Richardson carrying his portable laboratory kits. Not only did he show his enthusiastic love of geology, but he stimulated others to share in it. For example, he encouraged his students to collect their own mineral samples and run tests on them. Thus he demonstrated a great principle of adult education--that of involving learners in their own learning by having them apply what they have learned.

Many years earlier, in 1917, the Territorial Legislature had pioneered the provision of citizenship training for foreign-born adults. They included gold-miners who came from the Klondike and reindeer herders from Finnish Lapland who were teaching the Eskimos how to rear and use herds of reindeer. Under that law, the judge of the United States District Court in each judicial

division had authority to establish citizenship night schools at any camp, village, or settlement, or within the limits of an incorporated town.

Another pioneering enterprise was the establishment of university extension classes by the University of Alaska in 1949 and by Alaska Methodist University in 1960. This outreach took the form of credit courses to enable military and civilian personnel to work toward obtaining Bachelor's and Master's degrees. The courses were offered in small Alaskan communities, as well as at major military installations. For military men, the innovative aspect of the program was the granting of credit for service experience. Pioneering this idea for the Anchorage area were Laura Jones, Registrar of the University of Alaska; Gene Short, Anchorage Community College; Dick Ragle and Grant Perkins at Elmendorf Air Force Base; and Challis Coombs at Fort Richardson. In 1962, when I attended a national conference in Miami in my capacity of Director of Evening, Off-Campus, and Correspondence Study at the University of Alaska, I discovered that our program was one of the most innovative programs at the time. The significance of the work of all these people lay in their recognition of the need of many military men and civilians in Anchorage to prepare themselves at middle age for a meaningful second career. This perception of needs and of the importance of counseling adults facing such midlife career shifts shows our pioneers to have been adult educators in the best sense of the word.

I have mentioned the contribution of Eugene Short of Anchorage Community College. There, in addition to courses leading to an Associate in Arts degree and transferable to a four-year institution, vocational and career programs were organized, based on particular needs of the staff of Alaskan industries. A similar kind of leadership was displayed by Dr. James Simpson, an American Indian who became Director of Ketchikan Community College, and

Dr. Dorothy Novatney, first Director of Juneau Community College. Incidentally, Dr. Novatney was the second person in the world to earn a doctorate in adult education, which she obtained at Teachers College, Columbia University. This rich professional preparation enabled her to contribute valuable insights to the University of Alaska administrators at Fairbanks and to the Board of Regents with respect to the establishment of policies for adults.

As for Kuskokwin Community College, in addition to offering courses to people in the Yukon-Kuskokwin area under the leadership of Pat O'Rourke and Vicki Malone, it initiated in 1974 one of the first Associate in Arts degrees in adult education in the United States. Last year, the first two students graduated from that program, Fanny Crowe and Kathy Walter. They are now working for the Bethel Regional Adult Education Program. This move by Kuskokwin has enabled teachers in rural Alaska to obtain the training necessary to become teachers of adult basic education. The program offers maximum flexibility in the delivery of courses--for example, workshops, semester-long courses, televised courses, self-study courses, and on-the-job training. Such flexibility is another important principle of adult education, because it takes into account individual differences among adults. It also acknowledges the time constraints placed on adults, who must fill many other roles such as spouses, parents, church and community workers, etc.

The training of adult basic education teachers was not, however, restricted to Kuskokwin. A true pioneer in facilitating such training was George Swift, who, from his office in Juneau, acquired funds for the operation of adult basic education programs, including the training of teachers in the South Forty-eight and in Alaska.

I should say here that pioneering efforts in adult basic education in Alaska began with the U.S. Army at Fort Richardson in September, 1951. But the real leadership at Fort Richardson emerged in 1957, when the Army established an on-duty refresher course to give men with less than eighth grade education, or low aptitude test scores, an opportunity to attend courses full-time in order to gain an eighth grade certificate, a high school GED certificate, and the skills necessary to raise their scores on the Army tests. The purpose was to assist them to advance in their military roles and to prepare for civilian life. The program was significant because it was the only on-duty program offered at that time to enlisted men on a full-time basis in any branch of service throughout the world. However, one of our problems was that people with low education levels were often defensive about their need for education, which they associated with schooling--frequently with such negative aspects of schooling as unsympathetic teachers, low grades, and punishments. One Master Sergeant once said to me: "Mr. Niemi, do you see this combat infantry badge? It was good enough in World War II and Korea, and you want to send me to your dum-dum school!" I recognized his right to insist upon the value of his life experience, even though his formal education was limited. Then I questioned him about his future plans and he began to see his need for further education. In other words, I was following an important principle of adult counseling--appreciating the life experience of others while helping them to discover for themselves what they lack and to plan a course of action to overcome it. The civilian education officers who gave leadership to the Army's program in Alaska at that time included Ernestine Danielson, Hank Harrison, and A.J. Douglas.

On the basis of that experience, the Fort Richardson Army Education Center was asked, in 1959, by the Alaska National Guard to initiate a high school

GED testing program for a selected group of non-commissioned native officers. It was certainly gratifying to see this recognition by the Guard of the need to help native leaders.

Another experience worth mentioning relates to the attempt to provide trained staff for rural Alaska. At first, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) workers came from other states as facilitators of community development and teachers. Then came the design of an Alaska VISTA. Under this program, which represented a joint project between VISTA and the State of Alaska, natives were selected for training as community VISTA volunteers who returned to their home villages to conduct ABE classes. This practice illustrates another vital adult education principle--the desirability of preparing native teachers who understand the language and the cultural values as outsiders could not.

In this discussion of adult basic education, I must commend the center which was established in Anchorage. Through the efforts of people like Wayne Hussey, Nancy Gross, Diane Owens, Fran Rose, and Ida Hunter--to mention a few--programs and materials were designed to meet the special needs of the Alaskan student in urban settings. Here a major pioneering venture was conceptualized and later launched by Jim Irany, Nancy Gross, and George Swift. Their purpose was to create at Anchorage Community College an Adult Literacy Laboratory, known as ALL. The acronym ALL is truly an appropriate one for this innovative project, which has as its major goal the design of curricula and materials for use by teachers in rural Alaska with natives wishing to acquire basic skills. Those skills would, it was felt, help them to assume more significant roles in a society being totally re-shaped as a result of the land claims settlement and the building of the pipeline. Those developments

have caught many Native Alaskans unprepared to assume the new responsibilities thrust upon them. The situation, which has dramatized the acute need for meaningful adult education programs, has been complicated by the rediscovery of the concept of ethnicity. A major implication of this revival of pride in native origins and traditions was that the people charged with planning ABE programs could not hope to solve problems distinctive to the Alaskan setting by referring to research and practice in other states.

An immediate problem facing teachers was a lack of adequate materials appropriate to the Alaskan setting and suitable for Native Alaskans with minimal reading skills. The available commercial materials seemed totally unsuited to their needs. Hence the ALL staff saw as its major purpose the development of culturally relevant materials capable of being used by para-professionals, or native teachers. The content of those materials, which emphasized reading and mathematics, was written in English. During their first three years (1972-75), the ALL staff produced 34 books and conducted field tests of them in twenty villages. A unique feature of this operation was the commitment by native teachers, who accepted responsibility for trying out the new materials, providing feedback as to their effectiveness, and generating ideas for revising them and/or designing new materials to meet the needs of the people. In observance of the cultural differences among Eskimo and Indian groups, great care was taken with the design of illustrations and the setting, as MacAlpine indicates:

> Because of the several different native cultures in Alaska, the setting and type of illustrations varied. The first series deals with the life of a family living along an inland river. The second series deals with the life of an old man who lives in a coastal village.[5]

In addition, ALL developed supplementary readers, which included stories from the Indian and Eskimo oral traditions, and special interest books which focused on necessary "coping skills" pertaining to income tax, banking, and the Alaska Native Claims Act. It is of some significance that Alaskans were focusing on these coping skills prior to the publication of Northcutt's APL research at the University of Texas during 1975. Finally, the ALL staff, in cooperation with the Tanana Survival School, created a number of how-to-do-it craft books for use in Alaskan villages; for example, how to make sleds, snowshoes, etc. Some persons who were active in this project were Anna May Osip, Kathy Lynch, Gretchen Bersch, Mildred Jackson, Anecia Breiby, Marsha Million, and Donna MacAlpine, who was mentioned earlier.

Before I conclude this discussion of the contributions of the University of Alaska to adult education, I must pay tribute to Dr. William R. Wood and Dr. Arthur Buswell. During his tenure as President of the University, Dr. Wood constantly reiterated his conviction that the most important resource in Alaska was the human resource--its people--and he initiated an inquiry into the role of the University in the education and training of adults. Then in 1961, with funding from the Fund for the Advancement of Education established by the Ford Foundation, a study committee was organized to draw up a blueprint for continuing education in Alaska. In 1962, Art Buswell, Dean of Statewide Services, and I were given the responsibility to begin implementing the committee's recommendations. I am happy to report that all the recommendations contained in the report have been implemented. Those in which I have a special interest relate to mass media as a way of delivering programs, both non-credit and credit, via satellite to remote villages. Here I want to mention two men who made possible this use of mass

media. They were Robert Merritt, an electrical engineer at the University of Alaska who designed a $1,000 corkscrew antenna to enable the University to send radio communications via a NASA satellite to approximately twenty native villages; and Dr. Charles Northrip, head of the public radio station at the University, whose staff developed non-credit adult education programming via public radio. Through their pioneering work, they overcame the effects of the Aurora Borealis on the delivery of programs via the mass media. These programs were successful in providing continuing professional education to schoolteachers and health aides in the villages. Today we have a new pioneering effort in the transmission of GED tapes via satellite to many villages.

Another innovation in the use of media to determine community needs was the Sky River project out of Anchorage, which treated the village of Emmonak as a case study. There, the native people used videotape recorders and film as a way of presenting to the Governor the case against residential schools and the case for regional schools instead. An important adult education principle illustrated by this project is the provision to a community of the tools that will help them to assess their own needs and to assign priorities to them.

In the discussion so far of pioneers in adult education in Alaska, you might see some gaps, especially concerning the roles of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the churches. Let me speak briefly about them. In the case of the BIA, money became available in 1957 to begin formal adult education programs. Although initial surveys showed high interest, the Bureau was beset by many problems, as Crites indicated:

> If we have a community where an Adult Education Program is in demand, and there are no quarters, we can't give them a program. This is why we employ spouses of teachers for this work. Later on there will be talk of putting adult education units at the larger stations. Eight communities where adult education started no longer have the program. In some instances, the units were discontinued because the adult education instructor moved away. In one or two cases, it was reported that the community lost interest in the program.
>
> The Adult Education Program is operated through the organizational setup of our regular program. It is a step-child in some instances. When an educational specialist goes into a community, he often feels that his first obligation is to the regular school program. When the time comes to talk about Adult Education Programs, it is time to leave. Or he may shy away from it because he does not know much about it.[6]

Despite these problems, the Bureau of Indian Affairs did initiate programs in such locations as Beaver in 1958, Arctic Village in 1961, and Chalkyitsik, Tetlin, Tanacross, Point Barrow, English Bay, and the Alaska Native Hospital.

Concerning the churches, their efforts were naturally directed along religious lines and included translations of the Bible into the Athabascan and other native languages and the creation of dictionaries. Because facilities and materials for formal adult education were lacking, many of the churches' efforts at adult education were informal. In effect, ministers and priests worked with adults on an individual basis and, more often than not, the natives learned by their example. This is what we call learning by chance, as opposed to learning by design.

So much for what has happened in adult education in Alaska in the past. To come to the present, Dr. Marshall Lind, your Commissioner of Education, is the first chief state school officer to be appointed to the National Advisory Council on Adult Education; David Alexander brings ten years of experience in literacy education to your Staff Development Program;

and Carl Pohjola (my old boyhood friend) is responsible for much of the growth of Alaska's community education program. It seems to me that there is an urgent need to continue to equip adults with the skills they require to cope with a society that is vastly different from that in which their forefathers lived. I see from your conference program that there is considerable concern about the range of skills that adults need in order to fill their new roles. I note, also, that the conference theme is Be Your Own Person. How important it is for us, as teachers of adults, to follow this advice. To become our own persons means to know the joy of liberation from dependence upon others and the joy of learning to make our own decisions, so that we can take control of our own lives. The gaining of such freedom is bound to make us more creative, more adventerous, more innovative--qualities that you will recognize as those belonging to the sturdy pioneers. In other words, we do not need to think of pioneers as people who lived in some past age, people whose achievements we cannot hope to match. Every trail-blazer, every one of us who finds new ways of helping adults to learn can become worthy of being called a pioneer. And not only will we benefit, but we will be able to help our students become their own persons and pioneers in their turn, creating a strong chain of continuity between what we might call the new and the old Alaska.

References

1. Niemi, John A. "Fundamental Literacy Education for Undereducated Adults in the Outlying Areas of Alaska." Unpublished M.Ed. thesis, University of Alaska, 1963, p. 47.

2. Chance, Norman A. "Premises, Politics, and Practices: A Cross-Cultural Study of Education in the Circumpolar North," in Frank Darnell (ed.), Education in the North: Selected Papers of the First International Conferences in Cross-Cultural Education in the Circumpolar Nations and Related Articles. Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska, 1972, p. 4.

3. Burand, Willow (Bill) M. and Jean K. Burand. "Teaching Non-Credit Courses to Adults in Remore Alaskan Villages: A Personal Account," Thresholds in Education. Vol. IV, No. 2, May, 1978, p. 40.

4. Ibid, p. 40.

5. MacAlpine, Donna. "The Adult Literacy Laboratory," in Franklin Berry (ed.). The Collected Papers of the Cross-Cultural Education Symposium. Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska, 1974, p. 177.

6. Bureau of Indian Affairs. Adult Education In-Service Training Session: Anchorage, Alaska. Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1960, p. 2.